

“The Spitfire Grill” starring Alison Elliot, Ellen Burstyn, Marcia Gay Harden, Will Patton, 1995, PG-13, 116 minutes

Major themes:

- Redemption
- Starting over
- Transformation (personal and community)
- Rejection
- Forgiveness
- Grace
- Healing
- Wounded healer

Background notes:

The idea for the film came from the director of Sacred Heart League, a Catholic nonprofit in Mississippi. He wanted to make a film that was an alternative to their literature ministry. He searched for a screenplay and connected with Lee David Zlotoff, who wrote the script. Sacred Heart League funded the film, which was filmed in Vermont. The story is set in Gilead, a tiny town in western Maine. In light of sold-out festival screenings at the 1996 Sundance Film Festival, Castle Rock Entertainment bought the film’s rights for \$10 million, the largest sum ever paid outright for an independent feature film. It went on to win the audience award at the Festival. However, it received only a lukewarm reaction when distributed worldwide. Some critics labeled the film “proselytism in disguise” (interesting note: Jewish director, Catholic backers, Protestant characters).

Profits from the sale of the film were used to build a school in Southaven, Mississippi, near Sacred Heart League headquarters. The school's cafeteria is named "*The Spitfire Grill*."

Movie Nights for Thinkers and Seekers

spit·fire

noun

1.

a person, especially a girl or woman, who is of fiery temper and easily provoked to outbursts.

2.

a British fighter plane with a single in-line engine used by the R.A.F. throughout World War II.

This is the first time that permission was given to use Elmer Bernstein's main track from the classic film, "To Kill a Mockingbird." You'll hear this music at the beginning of the movie, as the title appears.

There is a mountainous region mentioned in Genesis 31:21 named Gilead, which means "*hill of testimony*" or "*mound of witness.*" In Hebrew, "Gil" means joy and "ad" means forever. Balm of Gilead is a healing compound made from the resinous gum of various trees. It is used in skin care products for the treatment of dry skin.

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“There is a Balm in Gilead” is a well-known traditional Black-American spiritual dating from the 1850s. The “Balm in Gilead” is a reference from the Old Testament, but the lyrics of this spiritual refer to the New Testament concept of salvation through Jesus Christ. The Balm of Gilead is interpreted as a spiritual medicine that is able to heal Israel (and sinners in general).

There is a balm in Gilead

To make the wounded whole;

There is a balm in Gilead

To heal the sin-sick soul.

Some times I feel discouraged,

And think my work's in vain,

But then the Holy Spirit

Revives my soul again.

If you can't preach like Peter,

If you can't pray like Paul,

Just tell the love of Jesus,

And say He died for all.

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Scriptures:

Jeremiah 8:21 – 22 (NIV) – *“Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?”*

Psalms 147:1 – 3 (NLT) – *“Praise the LORD! How good to sing praises to our God! How delightful and how fitting! The LORD is rebuilding Jerusalem and bringing the exiles back to Israel. He heals the brokenhearted and bandages their wounds.”*

Romans 5:6 – 8 (NLT) – *“When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.”*

1 John 1:9 (NIV) – *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”*

1 John 3:16 (NLT) – *“We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters.”*

Colossians 1:12 – 14 (NIV) – *“the Father. . . has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”*

Titus 3:4 – 5 (NLT) – *“When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit.”*

2 Corinthians 1:4 (NLT) – *“He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.”*

Major characters:

- Perchance “Percy” Talbott
- Hannah Ferguson
- Shelby Goddard
- Nahum Goddard
- Joe Sperling
- Sheriff Gary Walsh
- Johnny B.

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Discussion points:

1. What do we notice about Percy's character in the early scenes, e.g. when she is on the phone with a potential visitor to Maine? ("I don't believe I could leave Maine now even if I wanted to!")
2. Although Percy is short for Perchance, it is also a shortened form of Parsifal, the Roundtable Knight who sets forth on a quest for the Holy Grail. Discuss Percy's quest – what is she seeking? What are others seeking?
3. How do we see that trust breeds trust, just as distrust breeds distrust?
4. Percy asks Hannah, while rubbing balm on her leg, "Are there some wounds so deep that the healing hurts worse than the wound?" Gilead, too, was suffering from a wound, highlighted by the disappearance of Hannah's talented son, Eli, after he went to fight in Vietnam. How can we best respond to wounds in people and communities?
5. Discuss Percy's gracious acts in reaching out to Johnny B.
6. How does the essay contest affect not only Hannah, Shelby, and Percy, but also the whole town?
7. Near the end of the movie, Nahum says, "I thought I knew her so well," only to admit that he didn't know her at all. How can our perceptions of others block us from getting to know the real person?
8. What evidence of hope do we see in the final scene of the town picnic? How can our church communities model hope and grace?